

Editorial: State funding will have to replace local school levies

By [Editorial Board](#)

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State lawmakers know what they must do to comply with a state Supreme Court mandate to fully fund basic education. The Legislature has to accept a greater share of funding education while reducing the amount local taxpayers pump into school funding.

In theory, it's a simple fix. In reality, it's incredibly complex. It will take years until a funding shift can be fully implemented.

And it will take more than a couple of weeks — which is when the state budget has to be signed, sealed and delivered by law — to get a plan in place to begin the process.

Lawmakers last week floated the concept to shift the cost of teacher salaries from local to statewide taxpayers. It has the support of Republicans and Democrats in the Senate.

“I don't know that we expect that it can get done in two weeks,” Sen. Christine Rolfes, D-Bainbridge Island, said after she and Sen. Bruce Dammeier, R-Puyallup unveiled their levy proposal.

It's been clear since the high court ruling, which is known as the McCleary decision, that the state had to stop relying on local school levies to fill holes in education budgets.

In Walla Walla, for example, the levy funds account for about 20 percent of the local school district's budget.

The Supreme Court contends the state's reliance on levy dollars for basic education is unconstitutional because levies are not a stable, sustainable source of money for education and aren't uniform across the state.

So, if the state funds much of what the levies now cover, what would happen to the levy funds now collected?

That's the (roughly) \$3.5 billion question — the amount of new revenue senators anticipate is needed to satisfy the high court.

“You can fix almost all of this by screwing around with property taxes,” Rep. Ross Hunter, D-Medina, chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, said in February. “In trading one tax for another, the potential is there to create disparity. School districts with high property values would end up paying more than those with low values.

Teacher salaries might be adjusted up or down depending on, well, how the pay is adjusted for the various school districts.”

It’s going to take political courage and a lot of time to get to a place where changes to the tax structure can even be considered.

Rolfes said lawmakers pitched this plan last week because they wanted to “get the issue on the table and get constructive feedback.”

Better later than never.

Now lawmakers must agree on a plan to fund schools — and the rest of state government — for the next two years. When changes to the tax structure are made, that budget can be amended.